ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and

July 1996

MCC Lesbian With AIDS Speaks Out

By Deb Hardy

When I came out of the closet as a lesbian 15 years ago, there were smiling faces, warm hugs and new friendships to guide me as I moved with excitement into the uncharted future. I was out and free to live my life and celebrate my sexuality.

In the past few years, I've learned that there are many kinds of closets which are just as dark and lonely as they were 15 years ago. When HIV struck, I found myself in the closet once again, all alone with my secret. Somehow I didn't think that those hugs and smiles would be there when I came out this time. I wondered if I should share my status with family and friends, or just remain silent in an effort to protect the ones I loved from the anguish I was experiencing around my new HIV diagnosis.

For years I had been a caregiver -- part of the support system for several of my brothers with HIV/AIDS. I visited the housebound and sat with the lonely. I helped prepare meals, provided transportation to appointments, walked

Ms. Deb Hardy

in the AIDS walks, participated in memorials, vigils, and marches -- always thinking of these "others" affected by this disease and wanting to be a part of a solution that would end the suffering and alienation of these men I'd grown to love so much. At the time, in spite of what I'd heard, I thought that HIV/AIDS was somehow just "a man's disease." In ten years, I'd only met one woman with HIV, and I think I considered her disease "an accident of sorts."

I never realized that in my efforts to provide support and hope for these PWA's I cared about, that I was laying a foundation for my own future: the day when I found out that I was one of "them" -- no longer only affected, but also infected by HIV.

That day my mind was flooded with questions, and my emotions felt out of control. What would I tell my family? How would I tell the lover I'd recently separated from? And how would I ever explain this to the community of lesbians I was a part of? Shame and fear quickly set in. I knew that HIV was an equal opportunity virus that doesn't discriminate. But quickly I learned there was an unspoken discrimination -- a "rule" that even I subscribed to, that stated that if I were any kind of "respectable lesbian," this wouldn't have happened to me.

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RWJ Faith in Action Grants Deadlines Extended

Grants of up to $25,000 to develop HIV/AIDS interfaith caregiving ministries are available to Metropolitan Community Churches through the Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation's Faith in Action Initiative.

Deadlines for the grants have been extended beyond the June 30 date announced in *Keeping in Touch.* In order to accommodate a large volume of applications, the following deadline dates have been set for 1996 and 1997:

August 1, 1996; December 2, 1996; April 1, 1997; August 1, 1997; December 1, 1997.

The grants will fund projects replicating the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers program pioneered in Kingston, NY, which have demonstrated that religious organizations of all faiths can form effective coalitions to provide home-based volunteer services, care and companionship to individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

(see RWJ Faith...page 2)

UFMCC AIDS Ministry Offers AIDS Action E-Mail

UFMCC AIDS Ministry has instituted an AIDS Action Alert program via e-mail. Periodically, UFMCC AIDS Ministry receives action alerts from the AIDS Action Council, the U.S. AIDS National Interfaith Network, the U.S. National Minority AIDS Council, and a variety of political action groups and community based organizations. These action alerts are now being directly forwarded to all persons on the AIDS Action Alert e-mail list.

UFMCC AIDS Ministry also sends other articles of interest to those in HIV/AIDS Ministry over the Internet, and responds to requests for help and resources directly by e-mail.

If you are currently receiving these alerts, and have an e-mail address, please send your request with your e-mail address to UFMCCHQ@AOL.com, and write "Attn: UFMCC AIDS Ministry" in the subject line.

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Christian Meditation Tape From Marsha Stevens

Marsha Stevens, through B.A.L.M. Publishing, has issued a new tape of Christian music and meditation, called *Rest.* Popular UFMCC musician and composer Danny Ray provides musical renditions of favorite praise choruses, including "You Are My Hiding Place," "This Is Holy Ground," "Seek Ye First" and 17 others. Over the music, Marsha reads a meditation, a relaxation exercise, a prayer, and scripture selections from *The Message*.

Marsha Stevens is the famed gospel singer/composer, who has performed throughout the UFMCC. She is the first lay recipient of the Board of Elders' Award for Excellence in Evangelism, the "Purple Grass Award," and has five solo albums and a concert video available.

Those who have heard the tape have high praise for its timeliness and effectiveness. Deb Hardy, a music director and person living with AIDS, states, "Nothing has calmed me more or given me courage to fight harder than Marsha's relaxation tape. Each time it reminds me of the power of God and of my own body to work together for healing."

Rev. Steve Pieters of UFMCC AIDS Ministry says, "At last a Christian relaxation and meditation tape I can recommend for anyone living with HIV/AIDS or any life-threatening condition. I recommend it for all of us searching for God's healing in our lives."

The tape is available for $10 from B.A.L.M. Publishing, P.O. Box 1981, Costa Mesa, CA 92628, or call (714) 641-8968. ♦

Ms. Marsha Stevens

PEP/MCC A Success In Northern Utah

The Peer Education Program of the Metropolitan Community Churches (PEP/MCC) is providing HIV education to youth at risk in Northern Utah, including Box Elder, Cache and Rich counties. This PEP/MCC is funded by a grant from the Utah Department of Health, Bureau of HIV/AIDS, and is being administered by MCC Bridgerland in Logan, Utah, with the cooperation of the Cache Valley AIDS Council.

On June 29, a four hour informational workshop was held to introduce the community to the program, to MCC, and to the Cache Valley AIDS Council. In addition, the workshop covered the need for ongoing HIV education in Northern Utah, the philosophy of peer education programs, and an overview of the PEP/MCC curriculum, including training in negotiation skills, refusal skills, and harm reduction techniques.

Recent graduates of the PEP/MCC training course presented a demonstration for the workshop participants, who included school administrators, PTA leaders, health and science teachers, and area clergy.

(see PEP/MCC A Success...page 4)

RWJ Faith... *(continued from page 1)*

The new program will provide up to $25,000 to each grantee, and will offer technical assistance to more than 900 interfaith community coalitions established by faith congregations to develop interfaith caregiving ministries for people of all ages with chronic health conditions. RWJ is particularly interested in funding HIV/AIDS ministries.

The Faith in Action Office has informed UFMCC AIDS Ministry that they are very excited about the numbers of Metropolitan Community Churches who have already inquired about grants, and encourage more to apply.

For more information, technical assistance, or to receive application materials, contact: Dr. Kenneth G. Johnson, Director, Faith in Action; Health Services Research Center, 368 Broadway, Suite 105, P.O. Box 2290, Kingston, NY 12401-0027. Phone (914) 331-0016; Fax (914) 331-4191. ♦

Consultants Engaged For UFMCC AIDS Ministry

Consultants from outside the UFMCC will be joining key UFMCC personnel for a long-range planning meeting for UFMCC AIDS Ministry. The meeting will be held in Los Angeles, CA, July 26 and 27.

The invited consultants include Mr. Eric Rofes, author of *Reviving the Tribe,* Ms. Sallie Perryman, of the AIDS Institute of New York, and Rev. Ken South, Executive Director of the U.S. AIDS National Interfaith Network. Rev. Elder Don Eastman, Rev. Jim Mitulski, and Mr. Ravi Verma will be joining the group to advise Rev. Steve Pieters on future decisions for UFMCC AIDS Ministry.

Each member of the consulting team receives a package of materials produced by UFMCC AIDS Ministry, including the Peer Education Program (PEP/MCC) materials, all UFMCC AIDS Ministry brochures and manuals, and a brief history of HIV/AIDS in UFMCC. ♦

UFMCC AIDS Ministry...

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Out of respect for the international diversity of the UFMCC, there are currently two AIDS Action Alert lists: one for U.S. residents regarding U.S. legislative issues, the other for those outside the U.S. Many of the action alerts received at UFMCC Headquarters concern issues particular to the United States legislative process, but we welcome action alerts regarding relevant issues from other countries and regions of the world. ♦

ALERT

ALERT is a quarterly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is Rev. Dr. A. Stephen Pieters. For more information, please write: ALERT, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90029; or call 213/464-5100; fax 213/464-2123.

MCC Lesbian... *(continued from page 1)*

But it did, and there I was -- 28 years old, working, playing, loving and living my version of the "American Dream." I was growing and maturing and seeing my ministry in UFMCC getting more defined and more effective. Would this news change everything for me? Would any part of my life ever be the same again?

I tried to shoulder the news, silently at first, living in a kind of self-imposed exile. It only lasted for a couple of weeks. But in that time I felt alone, abandoned by God and victimized by circumstances. The promising future that I had looked toward was now looming ahead, frightening and uncertain!

In my growing desperation, I sought help from an MCC pastor. She was a lesbian, my friend, and I knew that circumstances in her own family had brought her face to face with the challenges of HIV, especially as it affects women. She laughed, cried, and prayed with me as I shared my struggle with her. She gave me support and encouragement as I sought out medical care and began working through the maze of services for PWA's. She reminded me that although I may have felt abandoned by God, God never let go of me--that I was still in God's care, and that God still had plans to use me.

For the first year or two, however, I did hide out in the shadows of my HIV closet. I was still afraid that I would be judged, and that no one would be there to support me. But there came a time when I couldn't carry the burden alone anymore, and a night when I laid it down and things began to change for me.

It was an evening in May at our Northwest District Conference in Boise, Idaho when I realized that I couldn't keep fighting this battle by myself. The two men who had been my primary HIV support had passed away in the preceding weeks, and I was feeling very alone and afraid. Rather suddenly I lost that composure that always seemed to carry me through, and tears of grief, fear, and struggle poured out of me. As I began to cry, I wondered if the tears would ever stop falling.

Suzanne McKeag was visiting our district conference with her partner Marsha Stevens of BALM Ministries, sharing the Word through testimony and song. I didn't know Suzanne, but she ministered to me so effectively that she helped me find some much needed peace and relief. She also helped me shape the future of my ministry by demonstrating so beautifully what it really means to minister and care for someone. She didn't just pay lip service. She touched me. She met me in my grief and isolation, and helped me to see that I wasn't alone. As we shared, the tears of anguish were somehow transformed to a healing wash. I vowed to myself that I would never return to the shadows of that closet again. I held my head high, and with my newfound freedom and support in MCC, I identified myself as a lesbian living with HIV. I started living again.

It wasn't too long after that district conference that my health declined, and I was diagnosed with AIDS. I was retired from my secular job. At first, I felt useless, and I headed to the security of my recliner to live out the rest of my days! But within a few weeks, I was reminded that God still wasn't finished with me yet, and I found myself working with BALM Ministries. I now handle the bookings for Marsha's and Suzanne's ministry and often travel with them to MCC's all over the U.S. where I get to share my experiences and hope with others.

In my travels, I've visited a lot of churches, made a lot of friends, and found more prayer partners and support than I could have ever imagined. I've also met many people -- men, women and children -- living with HIV. And my heart aches so much for the ones who go on living in fear of rejection, carrying the burden of HIV alone. There is so much love and support to be found in our Fellowship, and I try to be a part of that support network because I want to give back to this community of believers who have given so much to me.

I can't imagine what the last year would have been like without my family in MCC's and independent churches all across this country. In the last six months, I have been hospitalized eleven times with PCP or complications of other opportunistic infections I live with. At times my declining health has seemed overwhelming, but at no time in the last few months have I ever really felt alone. I spent Thanksgiving and Christmas in the hospital with my biological family 2,000 miles away, and yet my holidays were still rich and full.

"Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

As I travel and talk to people about living with HIV, I try to remind everyone that HIV is not just my problem. We are all in this together. I talk about my search for answers when I was first diagnosed. In my search, I found strength and encouragement as I read about the miracles in the New Testament and how "Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8). I believe the Word and therefore know that God must still be in the miracle-working business!

I found hope in the story of the woman with the issue of blood found in Matthew, Chapter 9. She'd been sick for years and no one could find a cure, and it seemed that there was no hope for her. But she'd heard of Jesus. And she reached out, past her fears and the judgments of the day to touch the edge of His garment. He looked at her and said, "Your faith has made you whole!" She was healed.

I found great hope in her healing. But I also found, as I evaluated my own situation, that there are many days when my faith is lacking. And if my healing is based on the amount of faith I have on any given day, I could be in big trouble!

It was on one of those faith-lacking days that my mother reminded me of the story of another miracle found in that same chapter of Matthew -- a story about a paralytic. No matter how much the man wanted to get to Jesus, or how much faith he had, he couldn't get there on his own. But his friends picked up his bed and took him to Jesus. They carried him to the roof, tore back the tiles, and lowered him into the presence of Jesus. Scripture tells us that "Jesus saw their faith..." and the man was healed!

I started to see at that point that on those days when I just don't feel like I have the faith to carry me through, my friends and family, like the friends of the paralytic, take up my cause and carry my name to the feet of the Great Physician who is the source of my healing.

Today, my life is very exciting and richer than I could have ever dreamed. I have six months worth of cards, letters, phone calls and well wishes from my sisters and brothers in this Fellowship. I need to respond to them -- and at the rate I'm going, I'd better pray for a very long life, or I'll never get to them all! But I think that's a challenge I can live with!

When I found out that I was HIV positive, it seemed that my life was over, and life as I knew it, was. But as I've grown, and as my disease has progressed, I really have been blessed with "new eyes" that see most days as beautiful, no matter

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Upcoming Conferences

* AIDS, Medicine and Miracles Conferences

October 10: Washington, DC
November: Houston, TX

For information, contact the AM&M office at P.O. Box 9130, Maxwell Building, 311 Mapleton, Boulder, CO 80301-9130; phone 303/447-8777; fax 303/447-3902; Toll free 1-800-875-8770.

* "Our Legacy of Courage": U.S. National Skills Building Conference

October 10-13, 1996, Washington, DC. For information and registration, contact 1996 National Skills Building Conference, 1931 - 13th St. NW, Washington, DC 20009-4432; phone 202/483-1124.

*AIDS Symposium For Pastoral Care Givers at U.S. National Cathedral

A national symposium, "AIDS and the Cure of Souls: Reshaping Pastoral Care"; October 10, 1996 at Washington National Cathedral, sponsored by the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition, the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, the College of Chaplains, and other pastoral care organizations. Registration is $25. For registration and information, call 202/628-6628. Rev. Steve Pieters is among the speakers.

Methodist Guide For AIDS Ministry

"Created and Loved by God: An HIV/AIDS Ministry Covenant to Care Handbook" is a "comprehensive guide for local congregations... to use to develop HIV/AIDS Ministries. It provides biblical and theological background, program ideas, and materials which every congregation can use."

The cost is $4.95. The guide can be order from:

Service Center
General Board of Global Ministries
United Methodist Church
7820 Reading Road, Caller No.1800
Cincinnati, OH 45222-1800
Fax orders: 513/761-3722
Phone: 1-800-305-9857

PEP/MCC A Success...

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PEP/MCC was created, published and distributed in 1995 by UFMCC AIDS Ministry, in cooperation with the Peer Education Program of Los Angeles, as a resource for local churches to create an HIV prevention program for youth. The project was funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, through the U.S. AIDS National Interfaith Network. ♦

New AIDS Ministry Q&A Page on The Internet

The Body, an interactive HIV/AIDS information site on the World Wide Web, now offers a question and answer page for faith issues related to HIV/AIDS. Rev. Steve Pieters, Field Director of UFMCC AIDs Ministry, answers questions posed by readers of the web site. For the past eight months, Pieters has also been writing a bi-weekly column on HIV and Christian spirituality for The Body.

Pieters' columns, as well as the question and answer page, can be reached at *http://www.thebody.com/pieters/revpiet.html.* Other UFMCC AIDS Ministry resources, can be accessed at *http://www.thebody,com/ufmcc/ufmccix.html.* ♦

World AIDS Day '96 Seeks "One World, One Hope"

"One World, One Hope" will be the theme for the ninth World AIDS Day, held on December 1, 1996. The World Health Organization establishes the date and theme for the annual international observance.

A resource book for congregations, schools, communities and organizations planning World AIDS Day events is being prepared by the American Association for World Health. To be placed on the list to receive a FREE copy, write to:

AAWH
1129 - 20th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006 USA
Phone: 202/466-5883

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what the weather is like. I found love and compassion for other people that I never knew existed. And although I deal with the reality of the struggles that come with living with AIDS, with the help of my caregivers and friends, most of whom are in MCC, I've begun to celebrate my life instead of worrying about my death.

As I am writing this article, I am sitting in a treatment room at the clinic that treats me for HIV/AIDS, enjoying that first cup of morning coffee and friendly chat with Lauri, my caregiver, and the clinic staff. We're sharing thoughts and feelings, dreams and future plans. Today we have some pretty important decisions to make like, what should we do for lunch?

I'm really not the least bit concerned about what other people think of me and the fact that I have AIDS. I have the support and love that I need to face anything. My concern today is much bigger, as I ponder the origin of these three units of blood I'm receiving in this transfusion. Who were these donors? What are they like? Could they possibly have been a gay brother or a lesbian sister -- or is it possible that they were flaming heterosexuals, or even Republicans? The possibilities seem endless and laughter fills the room as I share my concerns with the nursing staff.

I remember a time, when I sat in this very room feeling like I'd been dealt a death sentence. Since then I've learned that it was just another obstacle in this road we trudge called "life."

I try to make the most of every moment and I find that life is good! There is still love, laughter, and play. Even after an AIDS diagnosis, there is life!

There is a saying that I've taken to heart -- "Today is the first day of the rest of your life!" And it is! Each new day brings with it hope. I look toward the days ahead anticipating a bright future. And I am strengthened as I face that future as a willing participant and no longer fear it as a victim! ♦